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SHOOTING OF THE POPE

Secrecy Shrouds Probe of 'Bulgarian Connection'

By Jonathan C. Randal
Washington Post Foreign Service

ROME—Two years after the shooting of Pope John Paul II, the torrent of accusations implicating Bulgaria and the Kremlin itself has subsided into an eddy of theories, political and diplomatic machination, and prolonged anticipation of results of Italy's investigation.

Only one taciturn man knows whether a convincing case exists for what the Italian media has dubbed the "Bulgarian connection." He is Ilario Martella, the investigating magistrate empowered to probe the sometimes-questionable allegations by the Turkish would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, that he received help from imprisoned Bulgarian airline official Sergei Antonov.

Interviews with government officials and other sources familiar with the case during a three-week journalistic inquiry in Italy, Turkey, Bulgaria, Switzerland and France suggest that the Italian magistrate has gone furthest in the investigation. Martella has a reputation for probity, and a higher court that has considered submissions from him and Antonov's lawyers twice has upheld the Bulgarian's detention.

But Martella, who legally has up to 5½ years before deciding whether to send Antonov to trial, may choose to take until early next year to present his case, according to Italian sources. Meanwhile the magistrate, other Italian officials and even the U.S. Embassy here have clamped heavy secrecy on the investigation. They were troubled by leaks and charges at the end of last year over findings regarding Antonov and two other Rome-based Bulgarian employees charged in the case.

As a result, little is known of how much independent evidence supports the hypothesis that Bulgarian intelligence officers plotted to kill John Paul on behalf of the Kremlin because of the pope's support for the Solidarity union in his native Poland. A variety of non-Communist intelligence agencies, reportedly including those of Turkey, Israel and major western powers, are not yet convinced that the Bulgarians were behind the plot.

Agca, presented with a file of photographs, has picked mug shots of the three Bulgarians with whom he supposedly planned the May 13, 1981, shooting. He also described Antonov's apartment after saying that he met there with them.

In his description, however, Agca mentioned having seen a folding wooden door that in fact was present in other apartments in the building but not in Antonov's, according to Italian sources.

This discrepancy and others have been cited by Antonov's lawyers as suggesting that Agca was fed his information by Italian secret service agents who visited him in jail in autumn of 1981 before the Turk finally began to cooperate in the probe. The Bulgarian and Soviet governments have rejected the charges and suggested that they are part of a smear campaign by western intelligence agencies including the CIA.

The theory of Bulgarian involvement is considered plausible in part because of a pattern of Bulgarian "dirty tricks," particularly in Italy and Turkey, including smuggling of arms, narcotics and support for subversive paramilitary groups.

Statements by Agca have set in motion a parallel investigation of alleged Bulgarian spying in Italy and involvement in a stillborn plot to kill Solidarity leader Lech Walesa during a visit to Rome in 1981.

Months after last fall's burst of publicity, the case today bobs to the surface only occasionally in Italy.

Most officials and other sources are waiting to see if Martella will find some "smoking gun" to tie the investigation together.

The two Bulgarian officials other than Antonov who were charged by Martella are living in Bulgaria and appear unlikely to be extradited. Little has emerged about any possible links between Bulgaria and two Turks jailed by Martella who supposedly provided Agca with his pistol and conveyed an offer of \$1.75 million to shoot the pontiff.

Some Italians are convinced that before last year's publicity Martella was counting heavily on the prospect of years of imprisonment to gain more information from those detained.

In Agca's case, at least, Martella's tactics appear to have paid off. Agca first stonewalled with vague testimony and insisted that he acted alone. After serving less than a year of his life sentence, however, he implicated the Bulgarians and fellow Turks in December 1981 and apparently has talked to Martella ever since.

When Agca's statements are compared to challenges by Antonov's lawyers, however, the impression emerges that Agca has not proved infallible.

In addition to noting the nonexistent door in Antonov's apartment, the Bulgarian's lawyers have produced hotel bills indicating that Antonov's wife Rossitska was already in Yugoslavia en route to Bulgaria when Agca said that she was present in the apartment during one of the Turk's meetings there.

The Antonovs' daughter Ani, who also was named by Agca as having been present, was not in Rome at all during that school year but in Sofia.

Antonov's lawyers have intimated that two Italian secret service officials, who are known to have visited Agca in prison, fed false information to him. The lawyers have suggested that the Italian agents may have shown Agca photographs of Antonov and the two Bulgarians whom he later identified for Martella.

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